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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the need to examine value systems in composition courses concerned with persuasive writing. Values are defined as beliefs used to evaluate or structure experience. When concepts and facts are related to daily life, as they are in persuasive writing, they either reinforce values already formed or necessitate a change in values. What a student of persuasive writing needs, then, in addition to instruction in the inductive and deductive methods of developing arguments, is the ability to recognize what values are being discussed in persuasive writing. Realizing that such recognition is not easy for students, the paper presents Lawrence Kohlberg's research into the stages of moral development, to show that students are at that stage where they are just beginning to distinguish between values in which they truly believe and values of their family group and country, to which they have merely conformed. By discussing value issues in the classroom, where they are free from community pressure to conform to attitudes not their own, students can further develop their own value systems. This, in turn, will help them to think clearly and to write clearly. (RL)

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THE DELINEATION OF VALUES AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF A UNIT ON PERSUASIVE WRITING

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Clear writing demands clear thinking. The objective of the persuasive paper is to teach the student the method of developing a clearly thought out argument. Most teachers of freshman composition start with induction and deduction as methods of developing an argument. This paper proposes that in addition to understanding the logic of induction and deduction, the student should be taught to recognize his own values and to become sensitive to the values of others as expressed in their writing. Once the student has been taught to be sensitive to values, he can understand why both he and others choose to support certain generalizations and the particular inductions upon which those deductions rest.

The first step in defining values is to define facts and concepts and to place each in its relationship to the other. Facts are defined as the measurable quantities of the world. Concepts are defined as the integrating factor which gives meaning to the facts. Finally, values are defined as that which enables us to guide our lives; they are beliefs that we hold with reference to our experience which are used to evaluate or structure our experience. Values are formed from meanings we perceive from concepts and facts. When we relate concepts and facts to our daily lives, we either reinforce our already formed values, or replace old values with new ones.

Because the writer's value system underlies his thesis or proposition, no paper of argument can be clear or logical without the explicit statement of that value system. Students can be helped to understand this requirement through the following exercise which posits two opposing propositions and the facts, concepts, and values

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that make up the argument.

1. Problem: students feel that they cannot have an adequate learning experience under a system of grades

(A) Facts: our school rewards and punishes students with grades

students who receive failing grades usually drop out

students frequently cheat to get good grades

students study for exams rather than for knowledge

students do not help each other to learn

(B) Concepts: learning involves much more that learning material for exams

it is easier to be honest in a non-competitive situation

students learn more through collaboration than through competition

grades do not permit sensitivity to differing rates of learning

(C) Values: collaboration

respect for individual differences

authentic learning

honesty

Proposition: Our school should operate on a pass-fail basis.

2. Problem: students cannot learn adequately unless they are subjected to a grading system

(A) Facts: students' rate of learning goes up before an exam

students are motivated to study because of exams

there is a positive correlation between length of time spent studying and good grades

there is a positive correlation between a high grade-point average and good pay after graduation

(B) Concepts: grades serve as an effective motivator for learning

a non-competitive system is unfair to better students who deserve a grade reward

competitive people are more successful than non-competitive people

(C) Values: competition
success
respect for authority

Proposition: Our school should operate on a grading system.

Another excellent reason for asking students to spell out both sides of an argument in terms of the facts, concepts, and values that make up that argument is the necessity to present the refutation of a proposition in every persuasive paper. Naturally, this procedure requires that the student be familiar with the values underlying his opponent's position, as well as the facts and concepts that contribute to the formulation of those values.

A definition of concepts and values is essential as the first step in presenting the student with the need to analyze his arguments and those of others. Concepts can best be understood as integrative statements that give meaning to factual material. A concept is fundamentally a definition constructed from a number of facts, and can be seen as the invariant nature of a group of particulars as in the following: the facts in a particular research on the relationship between smoking and lung cancer revealed that the mortality rate of a sample of one thousand men who had been heavy smokers for twenty-five years, when compared with another sample of light and non-smokers, was statistically significant in terms of smoking as the causal factor for death. The concept that can be developed from these facts is that smoking causes cancer because all the cases revealed the invariants of excessive smoking followed by death from cancer. Exercises in which the class can generalize from factual material will clarify the nature of concept-making.

Students also experience problems in recognizing values. It should be noted that values represent the starting point in every argument.

A necessary question to ask when one is in search of values is why should a person act in such-and-such a manner? Research into the value systems of children and adolescents has made a helpful contribution in terms of helping us to more clearly define values. Lawrence Kohlberg[1] has defined three moral stages in the development of children and adolescents. The preconventional level values are those judgments which are held in response to cultural labels of good and bad, and represent a response to the physical power of those who enunciate the rules and labels of good and bad. Middle class children from ages four to ten are concerned with preconventional values. The conventional level is seen in preadolescence where the individual maintains the expectations and rules of his family, group, or nation. Values held in this stage of development conform to and maintain the existing social order. Lastly, Kohlberg defines the postconvention or autonomous stage of moral development which is first evident in adolescence. It is a "major thrust toward autonomous moral principles which have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups or persons who hold them and apart from the individual's identification with those persons or groups."[2]

Students may be at any stage of moral thinking as identified by Kohlberg, although college age students will generally be somewhere between conventional and postconventional values in their conceptualizations. Because the classroom is removed from the community in terms of its non-adherence to any particular special interest, it can be viewed as a workshop with its own norms. This special situation facilitates the discussion of values in an ambiance which supports re-evaluation of beliefs. An example of Kohlberg's findings with regard to the progression of childrens' and adolescents' values

regarding the value of human life will clarify this point. The six stages are as follows:

1. The value of a human life is confused with the value of physical objects and is based on the social status or physical attributes of its possessor.
2. The value of a human life is seen as instrumental to the satisfaction of the needs of its possessor and of other persons.
3. The value of a human life is based on the empathy and affection of family members and others toward its possessor.
4. Life is conceived as sacred in terms of its place in a categorical moral or religious order of rights and duties.
5. Life is valued both in terms of its relation to community welfare and in terms of being a universal human right.
6. Belief in the sacredness of human life as representing a universal human value of respect for the individual.[3]

If, for example, students with a traditional religious background are at the level of stage 4, they may make value judgments in terms of their church's pronouncements on rights and duties. Those outside of that particular enclave may not be entitled to these rights. It may very likely follow that someone who takes a value position based upon stage 4 would argue that there is nothing ironic about a clergyman blessing soldiers who are about to leave on a bombing mission. Students w are on level 5 or 6, on the other hand, will have moved to a position that condemns the killing of any individual, even those outside one's own intimate religious or social community. The classroom is a place where students can be encouraged to discuss value loaded issues without the pressures of community reinforcement of their attitudes.

Exercises based upon student evaluation of a series of propositions in terms of the underlying values are helpful and generate good discussion. The following propositions serve as examples:

1. College education should be free.
2. We should have a gun control law.
3. Sports should be competitive.
4. Children should care for their own pets.
5. A literacy test should be required of voters.
6. Cigarette smoking should be prohibited by law.
7. People should not be permitted to have more than two children.
8. Stringent laws should govern the food industry in terms of additives.

The instructor may find that although students are able to identify and discuss values held by self and others, when it comes time to write the persuasive paper, they may not understand just how to utilize values clarification. Although it is hard to set rules with regard to exactly where values should be elucidated, every paper of persuasion needs a statement of the values which are the foundation of that argument. Just how and where the writer will demonstrate the underpinnings of his proposition should be left to individual choice, but generally such discussion should occur in the beginning of the paper as part of the introduction.

Finally, the investigation of values allows the student to understand subjective bias more thoroughly. Whether one believes a deductive statement and accepts the inductive examples presented as support for a deduction depends upon a good deal more than the individual facts or the validity of the syllogism that proves a conclusion. In the last analysis, the values of the person gathering the inductions that lead to the deductions are responsible for any particular argument; whether one believes that a statement is true or false depends to a large extent on one's values. When students sre sensitized to the values that support an argument they are able for the first time to think clearly about questions and answers that often deserve a much fuller treatment than popular culture attributes to them. Those of us who are committed to education on the college level value the kind of thinking that Kohlberg calls postconventional and that the liberal arts have long called humanistic.

Footnotes

[1]Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan, "The Adolescent as Philosopher: the Discovery of the Self in a Postconventional World," in Youth and Culture, ed. Hazel V. Kraemer (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1974), pp. 598-631.

[2]Kohlberg and Gilligan, pp. 612-3.

[3]Kohlberg and Gilligan, p. 614.